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**SITUATED LEARNING IN ACCOUNTANCY: AN EMPLOYER
PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

Situated Learning in Accountancy: An Employer Perspective

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to highlight the perspectives of employers who participated in a 100 hour, for credit, unpaid, work placement program in Accountancy.

Design/methodology/approach – A case study method is used involving an interview-based, qualitative approach.

Findings - The study highlights the potential benefits and costs of the program with strong themes applicable to the real world accounting work environment and the interaction with people as essential elements of why students do a work placement; the importance of tasks in the student's learning; the significance of relating theory to practice; the nature of the costs involved in providing the work placement; the mutual reciprocal benefits obtained by both students and employers involved in the work placement; and the importance of work placements in accounting education prior to graduation.

Practical implications - This study provides evidence about the nature and value of work placements in accounting from an employer's perspective, and based on this research, other universities should be encouraged to implement an accountancy work placement program.

Originality/value - Little research has been done on the employer perspectives of work placements in Accountancy and the exploratory case study of this intervention, based on sociocultural learning theory, provides an insight into their perceptions.

Key Words Work placements, Internships, Situated learning, Initial professional education, Professional accounting education, Qualitative research,

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Long periods of work-based learning in the form of practica are vital elements of undergraduate education in teaching, built environment and the health sciences (Universities Australia, 2008). Concerns have been expressed over many years about the various approaches to professional accounting education (Accounting Education Change Commission, 1990; Albrecht and Sack, 2000; Hancock et al., 2009; Howieson et al., 2014; Mathews, 1990; The Pathways Commission, 2012). A key question becomes one of how learning and teaching can be improved and it is therefore appropriate that alternatives be investigated. In Accountancy, work experience placements prior to graduation are implemented in pockets of universities but are not part of the mainstream. An alternative approach could be based on situated learning. Sociocultural models of learning would suggest that learning optimally takes place *in situ* so if effective work placement programs could be universally implemented, then learning could be greatly enhanced (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Stanley, 2013).

As well, Wilkerson (2010) compared the pedagogy involved in professional education in medicine and nursing to accounting. He contends that programs that rely entirely or primarily on traditional classroom experiences are not adequately preparing its students for a career as a professional accountant. He recommends that students do a “significant clinical learning experience such as a practice internship” (Wilkerson, 2010, p. 11) and argues further that a “clinical experience in which accounting educators play no role in its development or oversight (e.g., a typical summer practice internship) is likely not a substantive learning experience” (Wilkerson, 2010, p. 11). Consequently, university involvement in the practice internship is very important to Wilkerson.

The motivation for this study is therefore the apparent lack of sociocultural learning in western English-speaking mainstream professional accounting education¹ and to provide further empirical data about the call for this type of learning to be

implemented into professional accounting courses. Also there has been little research in accounting education on the views of employers to work placements as a learning tool.

The key stakeholders in any accountancy work placement are the students, the employers and the university. In regard to the students, the findings of the short, for credit, unpaid program show that it was very beneficial in terms of student learning (Stanley, 2013). This paper, using interview data, describes the experiences of a cohort of employers who were involved in the work placement and gives an insight into their perceptions of the program by answering two research questions: How do accounting employers view the importance, value and outcomes of workplace learning? What are the implications of this exploratory study for further reform of university professional accounting education?

2. Literature review

This section reviews the literature on work placements in two areas: literature on employers involved in accountancy work placements and literature relating to sociocultural (neo-Vygotskian) theories of learning.

There has been very little empirical research conducted directly on the views of employers in accountancy work placements. Much of the accounting research is theoretical and draws on literature from other fields particularly cooperative education. For example, Paisey and Paisey (2010) quote studies that indicate that employers are involved because their participation makes a contribution to the community, enhances the development of skills, aids recruitment and is a cost effective way of performing certain tasks; whilst Weisz and Smith (2005) quote cooperative education literature to summarise the benefits. Of particular interest was Hurd and Hendy (1997) who summarise US studies on cooperative education up to that time and suggests 10 areas where employers think internships are useful – company image, recruiting, savings in

time and dollars, employee productivity, cost in time and dollars, retention rate, position level, career enhancement, affirmative action and new ideas.

However there are three important limitations to this employer research. Firstly it does not relate directly to accounting; secondly it is not all empirical research; and thirdly, are these views applicable if the program is short and unpaid, which is the case with this study. Most research on work placements/internships in accounting has been on placements that are long ranging from one year (Gracia, 2010; Martin, 1998; Paisey and Paisey, 2010; Weisz and Smith, 2005), eight weeks (Beck and Halim, 2008), to a minimum of 150 hours (Beard, 2007). Accounting employers also favour longer programs, for example a peak accounting body representative from Western Australia stated that “students can’t do anything for 6 weeks in accounting ... but they could do something in a four month summer placement” (Patrick et al., 2009, p. 35). However, most universities cannot fit 150 hours into their overall program/course structure let alone an eight week internship or a six or twelve month Work Integrated Learning (WIL) program. If general implementation of university-controlled, for credit accountancy work placements is to occur, there is a greater chance if the programs are short. This is why it is important to obtain the views of employers involved in a short, unpaid program. It is also important to ascertain their views on the role of work placements in professional accounting education – whether they should be compulsory, an elective, or simply not offered.

The second area of literature that has relevance to this study is the sociocultural (neo-Vygotskian) theories of learning. The sociocultural perspective on learning was first put forward by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934). His theories emphasised the historical and cultural contexts of learning and the vital role of language and speech. Of particular interest is the school of thought which led to the communities of practice model based on the work of Rogoff, and Lave and Wenger.

There are three key sociocultural learning aspects applicable to employers. Firstly, vital elements in learning are context, the problem solving approach (Rogoff, 1990) and the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Rogoff has done most of her work with children and places great emphasis on problem solving which involves the active nature of thinking – “People explore, solve problems, and remember, rather than simply acquire memories, percepts, and skills” (Rogoff, 1990, p. 8-9). It is essential that the tasks set are authentic and legitimate thus emphasising an appropriate context to the problem being solved. A very important element in learning through problem solving is the Vygotskian (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development. Essentially this means that with the guidance of the adult, the child will come to master problems which at present, they cannot do by themselves, but in the future, they will be able to do independently. What is crucial is the setting of the problems. They must not be too advanced or too simple and they must be capable of being done. This is called setting the task in advance of the developmental level (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

The second aspect relates to situated learning encompassing legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). “‘Legitimate peripheral participation’ provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice²” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 29). This is a theory about how learning occurs. It is a theory about relationships and the interactions that occur between the various parties (in this case the students and the employers) as they become involved in a community of practice (an accounting office in an organisation). Legitimate peripheral participation involves “participation as a way of learning – of both absorbing and being absorbed in – the ‘culture of practice’”; “what everyday life is like”; “who is involved; what they do; ... how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives; ... what other learners

are doing; and what learners need to learn to become full practitioners ... It offers exemplars ... including masters, finished products, and more advanced apprentices in the process of becoming full practitioners” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 95). Employers can therefore offer a real world learning experience in a community of practice.

The final aspect in sociocultural learning involves cultural tools (Rogoff, 1990), artifacts (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and tools relating to practical activity (Vygotsky, 1978). These are the tools that are used in any culture/community of practice that enable people to understand what is to be done and can be used to carry out the task as efficiently as possible.

The employers are therefore responsible for the learning context – the setting of the tasks (problems) for the students which is typically what jobs have to be done in the organisation at any point in time; assessing if the student is capable of doing that task; giving the student access to the various tools (such as computer software) that will help them carry out the task; and the allocation of appropriate staff to help the student learn. This sociocultural theoretical framework will form the basis for assessing the role of the employers in the work placement.

3. Methodology of the study

This research is a qualitative case study of a third (final) year unit of undergraduate study that involves a major component of workplace learning in the Accountancy Workplace Learning Experience Program at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in the period 2007 to 2008³ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Stake, 1995; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003a; Yin, 2003b). It uses situated learning as the basis for the intervention and for evaluating that intervention.

The participants in the study consisted of 10 employers who had supervised and mentored students in the workplace program at least twice. This represented approximately two-thirds of the employers who met the criteria. It was anticipated that

not all the possible employers would be available and so 10 employers was of workable size and large enough to collect a substantive body of data.

In order to choose the participants, the available employers were categorised by type of organisation (public accounting, commercial and non-profit) and then randomly chosen. As anticipated, two employers (one non-profit and one commercial) declined to be involved because the key workplace person had left their organisation and so the next employer on the list was chosen. The 10 employer participants included public accounting organisations which were registered with either CPA Australia or the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia (ICAA)⁴ (7), commercial-orientated organisations (2) and a non-profit organisation (1). This also represents the approximate proportion of the total number of 37 employers involved in the program over that two-year period which comprised public accounting firms (22), commercial firms (9), an insolvency firm (1) and non-profit organisations (5).

Instrumentation consisted of a semi-structured interview and each subject was interviewed face-to-face for approximately 35-45 minutes. The interview questions reflect the employer related research question in terms of obtaining data relating to the importance, value and outcomes of the program and the instrumentation was administered to all participants following QUT ethics protocols. These employers would be considered old-timers in Lave and Wenger (1991) terms so their perspectives are vital on whether or not they perceive the program to be important and what outcomes occurred.

Content and thematic analysis was conducted on the data according to the four stages outlined by Boyatzis (1998) which included sensing themes – that is, recognizing the codable moment; doing it reliably – that is, recognizing the codable moment and encoding it consistently; developing codes; and interpreting the information and themes in the context of a theory or conceptual framework – that is, contributing to the

development of knowledge. For the interview data, all interviews were transcribed and then the transcripts checked against the recordings for accuracy. To aid the thematic analysis, the computer software qualitative data analysis package Nvivo was used. The data was coded firstly in terms of the actual interview questions that were asked. From this initial coding, it became apparent that various patterns occurred and so the themes began to take shape. As well, various sub-themes within a theme became evident and so these also had to be coded and the data collated. Also, there were certain dissenters from the general view, or comments that indicated that problems had occurred. These also were coded and collated. It is from these experiences and representations of what happened that an account of events in the workplace could be constructed and what comprised the general nature of work in a professional accounting environment could be established.

4. The workplace learning experience program in accountancy

The overall aim of the 2.5 week (100 hours), unpaid, elective (for credit) program, which began in 2002, was to foster learning through work-related experience and this was very much in line with the situated learning theory by Lave and Wenger (1991). The program was designed to give students the opportunity to experience the work performed by accountants and enable them to more effectively learn and practice accounting knowledge and graduate capabilities⁵.

From the beginning, the work experience program was based on four key elements. Firstly, employers who would be willing to participate in the program without any payment. Bearing in mind that there was a cost to employers in having students at their workplace, it was vital that the employers be committed to the program.

Secondly, students would participate during the semester break and not be paid. The program was offered in the June/July winter break and the students were not paid as no student was paid to do other units as part of their degree. The students were placed

with employers by the university on the basis of an interview, GPA and preference for a particular area of accounting. The employers therefore did not interview the students to choose which ones they would like although they could indicate a desire for students that have a particular accounting interest. There was always a shortage of employers so not all students who applied were accepted into the program.

Thirdly, both the employers and the students had to know what was expected of them before the program began. Because the program was only 2.5 weeks in length, this was vital so both parties obtained maximum benefit and time was not wasted.

Finally, university staff hours involved in the program had to be what would typically occur for a standard unit/subject in the degree. The unit had to be treated like any other unit. The time allocation given to the coordinator of the program was in line with the standard time given to any other coordinator running a normal 12 credit point unit.

Strategies were therefore developed to ensure that these four key elements were successfully implemented each year. The following were components of the program:

- the structure of the program was developed from educational literature (Billett, 1993; Lave and Wenger, 1991), there were clear objectives, and graduate attributes/graduate capabilities/generic skills were emphasised (Crebert et al., 2004; Harvey et al., 1997; Martin, 1997);
- an introductory session was held at both the university and the workplace before the program began to outline what was going to occur. This was vital to the success of the program. At the university briefing, this was an opportunity to ensure that the students were aware of their responsibilities not only in terms of representing themselves but also representing the university. It was also an opportunity to discuss all the elements of the Student Manual which was given to them so they knew exactly what was required during the placement and to clarify any questions the students had. The

employer's workplace briefing enabled students to obtain information about the organisation and its structure, and policies such as starting and finishing times; meet the people involved; find where they would be located and set up computer access; and discuss the type of activities they would be performing. This enabled the students to begin real work when they came back to start the 13 day program;

- Student and Employer manuals were supplied that stated clearly what was expected and provided the scaffolding for the program. This included issues such as dress; client confidentiality; strategies on how to perform tasks; observations on such things as client interviews, team meetings, and accountants performing tasks; discussions about these observations, ethical issues, and career opportunities; assessment; and the collection of resources;
- reflective journals were completed by students at the end of each day (Ballantyne and Packer, 1995; Boud et al., 1985). This was seen as a key element in the student's learning;
- the three pieces of assessment to obtain credit for the 12 credit point unit included the Supervisors Report which was finalised at the end of the placement and signed by the student and the supervisor; and then upon returning to university, a Student Final Report detailing the student's experiences and what was learned; and an Oral Presentation to share those experiences with fellow students (Ryan et al., 1996). Each piece of assessment was graded on a Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory basis in order to enable students to make errors and learn from those errors without being unduly penalised. It also enabled supervisors, who were not trained in education and therefore did not have the ability to differentiate using a 7 point scale, to accurately assign an appropriate grade. A student had to obtain a Satisfactory on all three assessment items to gain a Satisfactory grade overall.

5. Findings: the experiences of the employers cohort

This section presents the findings of the interview-based inquiry into the experiences of a group of 10 employers and relates to what each individual employer thought about the 2.5 week learning experience placement. The findings revolve around the research question: “How do accounting employers view the outcomes, importance and value of workplace learning?”

5.1 Theme 1: work placement as a mutual reciprocal professional activity

A mutual reciprocal professional activity relates to the notion that by giving something, you are also gaining something as well. The students were prepared to give up their time and work without remuneration during their vacation. In return, they received the opportunity to obtain work experience. From the employer’s perspective, they received some extra help without financial payment; were able to see how a student performed over a lengthy period of time without any commitments instead of just a 30 minute interview to assess their ability, and if the students were perceived to be potential employees, perhaps offer them a job; and to see what the current group of graduates was capable of as a benchmark to be applied in future staffing decisions.

This sense of mutual reciprocal professionalism definitely came through in the comments of the employers about why they became involved in the program. Eight employers expressed a “feel good” view.

I suppose it’s the opportunity of giving something back ... People help you through life, so you help them later on. (Employer H)

However, this was not the only motivation. The second issue revolved around recruitment and staffing with six employers saying this was one of the reasons for being involved.

A couple of the people that we’ve had on over time, we’ve gone on to employ them. So we see it as a good way of ... having a presence at the university

and another way of feeding in an opportunity of ... road testing a particular candidate that may come through. (Employer I)

It should be noted that although some students were employed, this was not an objective or expected outcome of the program.

Four employers also mentioned a benefit in terms of extra help because they were busy at that time of the year and it was good to get an extra pair of hands to help with the work (two commercial employers) and the fact that the work the students do is free as the students do not have to be paid.

... the other thing is that on occasions, peak times, when the student tends to be around at an end of financial year in our case, they can help us keep our head above water ... at those busy times. (Employer D)

Despite the staffing implications mentioned above, three employers felt that giving students the opportunity to gain work experience was a reason for being involved.

You can have three years of QUT experience, or four years or whatever, but you come out and employers often say, great but you've got no experience. So giving people the opportunity to get some experience is actually quite good for them. (Employer E)

Finally the interviews revealed an implied notion that, while the program was of benefit to the students, there was also the benefit to employers in developing their relationship with the educational institution.

You know, being able to, as I have done, sort of contact you in the past about things and email you or whatever, to have developed some sort of relationship with the institution itself ... actual(ly) developing some form of liaison at the level that you and I have. That's probably the most beneficial thing to me. (Employer A)

Mutual reciprocal professionalism therefore allows both students and employers to benefit in the context of a professional setting and the employers thought that this occurred.

5.2 Theme 2: why students would do a work placement - real world accounting work environment and interaction with people

There were two main reasons why the employers thought students would want to do a work placement prior to graduation. The first was in terms of the work being real accounting work which was typical of what would occur if they were in a real job. All 10 employers gave experience in a professional work environment as being a major reason with comments relating to the office environment, experience with clients, what it was like to turn up to work, and what sort of work they would be doing. This confirms the views of students and graduates that this activity was a major element of the work placement (Stanley, 2013). It is also consistent with the views of Rogoff (1990) in terms of context and illustrates access to a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

The second major reason discussed by all 10 employers was the interaction with people. This once again emphasises the great importance that people play in an accounting environment with comments relating to seeing how people interact, what sort of people they will be working with, understanding the dynamics of the workplace, introducing them to the formal and informal networks that are in a firm, and building a rapport with other people in the workplace.

Accounting's about relationships. You know, I can't do my job if I don't have a good relationship with the clients or with whoever it happens to be ... With the kids themselves, you know, they have to be able to work together, and that's a whole team thing. It's a concept of relating to the people around you ... (Employer A)

At each different level in the organisation you might have a person with one years experience, 30 years experience, 10 years, 5 years etc. Each one of those people will have their different nuances, their requirements ... So I guess a graduate will be exposed to all of those differences and learn that they have to adapt to ... that environment ... Our game is all about people. Absolutely everything is about people. (Employer J)

The interaction with both internal and external people was seen by all employers as a vital element of the accounting profession.

This confirms the views of the students that the role of people in an accounting environment was very important (Stanley, 2013). This interaction by the newcomers

with a range of people who have had different years of experience is a major element of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

5.3 Theme 3: the importance of tasks

All 10 employers discussed the setting of tasks for the students. The employers had certain views as to what the students should experience. A typical comment was:

Some experience of the sort of work that we do and the sort of services that we provide for clients ... I guess some people learn by seeing and some people learn by hearing, but we try to get them to roll their sleeves up a bit.
(Employer B)

Although the employers provided little data in terms of how they specifically structured their program, the students were generally shown how to do something, or an explanation was provided about how to do something, and then the students tried to perform the task by themselves. Regardless of the tasks, the ability for students to ask questions from staff around them was an essential element of learning. Without being prompted, five employers indicated that this was happening.

Well if you've got a question, it's pretty easy to go and talk to anyone. That's probably something they have to realise. Some places it's probably different. But here you can virtually go to anyone and ask them a question and you'll get an answer. No-one's going to put you down or deride you or anything.
(Employer H)

One of the elements of learning important to three public accounting employers was related to students having to find the data to solve a particular problem.

What they (universities) can't really teach is ... being able to deal with information that is provided to them in a form for which they are not accustomed. Students are accustomed to read things which are generally well set out and legible and comes to them from a text book or from a lecture or from a fact situation that's given to them in which all the facts are either usually there or readily available. Real life doesn't actually work quite that way. They have to seek things out. (Employer F)

This aspect of requiring the students to have the ability to be able to pull things together from various sources is strongly expressed by these public accounting employers. This is endorsed by the contextual nature of problem solving (Rogoff, 1990).

An issue that did arise was the view by four employers that given the students were just beginning their career, the tasks they performed were not always going to be “exciting” (Employer D) and “glamorous” (Employer G) and this should be expected and accepted. In general, the students found the tasks to be worthwhile (Stanley, 2013) inferring that the tasks set by the employers were legitimate (Lave and Wenger, 1991). However, it was also established that for some students, this did not occur (Stanley, 2013) indicating that the employers did not always set appropriate tasks at the correct level. Despite the Supervisor’s Manual urging the employers to carefully supervise the setting of these accounting tasks, the evidence suggests that this did not always occur.

5.4 Theme 4: the importance of timeliness, accuracy and accountability

Time pressure in completing tasks was seen as a major element of an accountant’s work and was mentioned by one commercial employer and two public accounting employers. One employer spoke about the use of time sheets. Another argued that the students must understand that the pressure is on to work and to make money.

I think a fair bit of it would be new to them because they’re just reading out of books, computers. They’re just learning how to do things; hopefully learning how to find things out. But when they come here, the pressures on to work and make money ... They’re here to get it right the first time, not have to do it again. (Employer H)

The importance of accuracy and therefore accountability was mentioned by three employers.

I’m not one of those kind of laidback relaxed people, and I think to be good at what you do you have to be afraid of failing, and I mean really afraid of failing. Not just think, oh well, too bad, you know, move on, next one. I think no, no, no, no. You go back and you fix that one properly. There’s a healthy fear of doing the wrong thing, the impact on your workmates. (Employer A)

As well, Employer I talks about the public perception of accountants and the responsibility that goes with that. The figures that are produced by accountants are relied upon and staff must accept that responsibility in their work because “it’s our reputation on the line” and they are accountable. Timeliness, accuracy and accountability are important

elements of a professional accounting environment and this has been confirmed by these employers. It also evidences the situated nature of learning in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

5.5 Theme 5: the importance of processes and systems

The importance of learning about the processes and systems in the firm was emphasised by three employers.

Certainly they would learn systems, how a practice works, what drives a practice, that we have to be very systems driven and orientated otherwise we're inefficient and can't compete in the market place. Software plays a big part in our lives. They're on the computer all day long. (Employer J)

The processes and systems in place are generally designed to ensure the accurate and timely flow of work through the office. In this regard, computer systems play an essential role and a huge range of software was used by the students.

Employer F and one other employer also made specific reference to the steep learning curve in this regard.

I just knew that when I first got into public accounting, I was completely at sea. I had absolutely no idea what the hell these people were doing most of the time let alone how to do it and I sort of floundered really in my first job for a couple of weeks until I sought out a mentor who basically walked me through the whole process. Now for students, we can't really provide that full level in the period of time that they're with us, but we can certainly give them a sort of introduction to the learning curve anyway. It is a very steep learning curve for new accountants. (Employer F)

Employer F therefore sees the work placement as being a help to students in overcoming this very steep learning curve.

This theme illustrates the crucial role that is played in sociocultural learning by tools (Vygotsky, 1978), cultural tools (Rogoff, 1990) and artifacts (Lave and Wenger, 1991). It is the use of the tools applicable to the community of practice that enabled these students to have access to legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

5.6 Theme 6: relating theory to practice

In terms of the roles that universities and employers play, there was general agreement from all employers about these roles. The university's role was to teach the "*basics*" (Employer I), "*raw factual information ... general purpose theory*" (Employer F), "*base roots or the foundations of the theory and the knowledge*" (Employer C), "*theoretical background*" (Employer D), "*technical aspect*" (Employer H), and produce "*someone who's got very broad skills*" (Employer G). The employers generally agreed that their role was to give a practical element to that learning, to turn that theoretical learning into applied learning and to see how the work environment operates.

... the employer of them taking those basics and then extending it onto the practical sides of how do you take your knowledge of accounting, accounting standards, tax law and all those sorts of things and apply it on a practical level to a client who's a tradey or a builder or who's a doctor or a lawyer.
(Employer I)

Another aspect of this is whether the employers found the students related what they had done in university to the workplace. Six employers thought that the students were able to make the link while five employers indicated that the students did do this if only at a basic level. However, two employers said that the students did have some difficulty with the application of theory to practice. Employer A had very strong feelings in this regard. He said that for their entire life at school and university they have done "*theoretical learning, it's learning in abstract.*" Students get used to doing that type of learning. But at work, it is applied knowledge that is important and because they have not done much applying of knowledge, they find it difficult. This is consistent with the importance of context (Rogoff, 1990) and the whole notion of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger would argue that "*abstraction ... stems from the disconnectedness of a particular cultural practice*" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 104). This is why participation in a community of practice is so important.

Further to this, one employer believes that in accounting, it is not just relating theory to practice but understanding that the outcome is the important thing.

It might be that a certain set of circumstances gives rise to a number of different answers but here's the answer. But that's not what our job is. In fact, the relationship with the client is to say, okay, that's what the answer is if we apply things this way. Let's see if we can get a different outcome by restructuring or taking a different approach. (Employer B)

This is significant because it brings in notions of not just solving the problem at hand but achieving the best outcome. By widening the view, by taking a completely different angle or by restructuring what is being done, can a better outcome be achieved?

5.7 Theme 7: the cost of providing the work placement

In terms of setting up the program in the workplace, five employers said that the costs of running the program were not very great with three others saying that they already had spare desks and computers so it was not a problem.

Oh, there's costs. But they're minor. You know, there's arguably just that cost of diverting your time off to providing some coaching for someone. But you know, that's direct. But then if you net that off against the benefits, then it's outweighed by the benefits. (Employer C)

As stated in the comment above, it was the time it takes for people to look after the students that was the major cost and this was cited by seven employers. Time was therefore the major cost in setting up the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and performing the master/old-timers role in the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

5.8 Theme 8: a staff mentoring opportunity

When discussing how the program affected the employer's own professional practice, the employers generally saw this as a giving process. Five employers said that they did not think the program affected their professional practice and two indicated that students were mainly there to absorb rather than make suggestions. However, four employers saw the program as a great opportunity to engage staff in a mentoring role, a role

consistent with legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This is a role that accountants must play as they progress through their career so it was seen as good for the staff to get this opportunity.

I think there's a great benefit – sometimes we get some of our younger ones, some of our grads, or perhaps an undergrad who's been working for us a little while, to assist these people. It's good for their confidence, good for their ego ... Also, one of the important things for anyone to grow in an organisation, ultimately they have to manage other people. So there's a development of people skills, and it's good experience for them. (Employer B)

A part of legitimate peripheral participation is the notion that learning is an evolving form of membership in a community of practice. A person's role changes through time from newcomers and apprentices, through the middle phase of more advanced apprentices to old-timers and masters with ultimate full participation. This mentoring role is a major element of the hierarchical structures of accounting offices and conforms with the notions put forward by Lave and Wenger (1991).

On the other hand, the naivety of newcomers and the fact that they will question masters about what they are doing can be of great benefit. This adds to the learning. Employer F commented that when discussing or explaining something to students, staff are often forced to refresh their knowledge and to rethink what they are doing, and so the naivety of the newcomers can be seen as an asset to the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 117). It brings about reflection and in some instances, a better course of action by newcomers and old-timers alike.

5.9 Theme 9: the future role of work placements in professional accounting education prior to graduation

Seven employers felt that work placements should be a compulsory part of professional accounting education prior to graduation.

I'd certainly like to see it kept in place. I think it's a great idea. The two and a half weeks is not a long time but it's probably sufficient for them to get a handle on things and actually understand what it's like out there in the real business world, and I think that would probably be invaluable. (Employer E)

Two employers felt that it should be left as an elective mainly because these students really wanted to be at the workplace.

I'd suggest that if they were compelled they may not want to be there. So I think that might then become a disincentive for participation by employers.
(Employer B)

In contrast, the final employer suggested that probably the status quo remain and that employers should wait until the students have graduated and then employ them, as happens now.

It's a bit of a cost for a small practitioner to bear. So, because of the learning curve, my inclination is just to know when they're going to be ready to take on full-time and then take them on full-time. They learn when they join us. (Employer J)

As a result, there was no general agreement by the employers as to what should happen in the future. However, seven employers indicated that a work placement should be compulsory prior to graduation. To have such a large percentage of employers advocating something that is not part of mainstream professional accounting education indicates how strongly these employers support the program.

5.10 Evaluation

Research question one referred to how employers view the importance, value and outcomes of workplace learning. In general, the employers valued the program. They were supportive of it otherwise they would not take part and for this reason, no question was directly asked about this. However, seven employers did mention in the course of the interview that they were happy and very supportive. Typical comments included: *"I think it's an excellent program"* (Employer B); *"It's well organised"* (Employer D); *"Certainly this program that you've got at QUT is great ... I think it's brilliant, I think it's a great idea"* (Employer E); *"I'm really happy with the way it's going and good luck with it. I just wish more institutions did the same"* (Employer F).

The outcomes of the work placement can be seen in the various themes that have been discussed previously. The strong themes that emerged relating to student outcomes

revolved around the real world accounting work environment that students experienced; the interactions with people through the relationships formed; the importance of tasks and the ability to ask questions of the people around them; and relating theory to practice. These findings are consistent with learning in context (Rogoff, 1990) and situated learning through legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Sociocultural concepts can also be seen in other themes that were not as strong but were still significant. These were the importance of timeliness, accuracy and accountability (learning in context – Rogoff, 1990); and the importance of processes and systems (cultural tools – Rogoff, 1990; artifacts - Lave and Wenger, 1991; tools relating to practical activity – Vygotsky, 1978).

Regarding the outcomes for employers, the costs of setting up the placements were not very great with the major cost being the time given by staff to helping the students mainly in terms of task completion (explanations and answering questions); and some employers saw the placement as an opportunity for staff to hone their mentoring skills as part of managing people throughout their accounting career. This mentoring skills theme is confirmation of the roles that people play in legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Finally, the employers became involved, and continue to be involved, for a number of reasons based mainly around the theme of mutual reciprocal professionalism.

From the outcomes for students and employers mentioned above, it can be seen that the employers see the work placement as important. This importance is also emphasised in terms of the strong theme relating to the future role of work placements in accounting education prior to graduation. The employers definitely thought there was a role to be played by both universities and employers. The university's role was to teach the basics, the technical aspects, the theoretical background and very broad skills. The employers' role was to give a practical element to that learning especially through the real

context in which the students were placed and the work relationships that were formed there.

6. Conclusions and implications

From the empirical evidence obtained in this study and outlined in the previous section, the program was very effective. Combined with the student outcomes discussed in Stanley (2013), this strongly supports the view that the program was worthwhile and had value. This is very important for the university and the profession, especially as the program was a 2.5 week (100 hour) program. This is very different from the other research that has been done where students attended work placements for a much longer period (Beard, 2007; Beck and Halim, 2008; Gracia, 2010; Martin, 1998; Paisey and Paisey, 2010; Weisz and Smith, 2005). As indicated previously, the length of this program was deliberately chosen to be short so that it would be the approximate equivalent of a normal 12 credit point unit in the degree. As well, it was unpaid because in no other unit in the degree are students paid to do a unit. Students are not paid to attend medical and teaching placements and so a similar model was therefore trialled for Accountancy. If a 2.5 week program was seen to be successful, as was the case in this study, short placements based on sound educational principles would enable more universities to consider this as an option and thereby increase the number of professional accounting students undergoing a work placement prior to graduation.

6.1 Implications

In this section, research question two will be discussed: “What are the implications of this exploratory study for further reform of university professional accounting education?” The employers were supportive with 70% of those interviewed saying it should be compulsory and another 20% supporting the program but think it should stay as an elective. These employers feel comfortable with the work placement and its importance in professional accounting education. An interesting comment was:

So the whole on-the-job training process that we go through involves a significant cost, and why the profession and the industry per se doesn't embrace the concept of apprenticeship. It used to be the case ... Most of them worked; you know, they worked day jobs and they go to tech at night. Somewhere along the way that went out the door and I don't know when and don't know why, and I can't see it being reintroduced. Yet I believe it would be a wonderful, wonderful thing for the profession. (Employer A)

Employer A's views are similar to the apprenticeship model for accounting put forward in Australia by Vatter (1965)⁶. However this structure was never implemented.

As demonstrated in this study, universities and work places are equally important but promote different types of learning. They can be complementary. However, at the moment in mainstream pre-graduation professional accounting education, the learning is mainly at university. This great reliance on university learning must be questioned. As argued by Wilkerson (2010), greater consideration must be given to providing learning experiences that encourage participation in contextualised activities. Through situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation, participants are engaged in meaningful endeavours as they move from the periphery of the community of practice and over time, mature and become full participants. However, the key point is that in their pre-graduation accounting studies, students are not required to participate in this community of practice. Given that engaging with a community of practice is essential in the learning theory of Lave and Wenger (1991), this seems an unusual situation. This is why a work placement is so important and at least some time in the degree should be allocated to situated learning.

Wilkerson (2010) also argues that these work placement programs should involve development and oversight by accounting educators and so university involvement is crucial. If every university started a small program and grew the program over time, then perceived obstacles would be overcome and the path to general implementation would be made easier. For a university, a commitment to a 100 hour work placement is not large. It involves allocating enough resources, particularly in the form of staff time,

to set up and supervise the program. By moving towards a model of students obtaining credit for attending the work placement, the normal funding for a unit would apply.

However, the key to the success of this model lies with the employers. They are the ones who must give up time to allow the students access to their work places. The graduates were very strong in voicing their opinion about confirming both positively and negatively their career choice through the work placement (Stanley, 2013). Consider the comment made by this graduate where the firm recruited a large number of graduates and approximately half of them left in the first year.

They just decided a few months in or a few weeks in, I don't like this and I think, oh, our firm just spent all this money recruiting you and then you turn around and say, no I don't like accounting. I was like if only you'd done work experience then you would have known earlier that no, I don't like accounting this much. I can't handle the hours or I can't handle looking at all these numbers day in and day out. (Graduate 10)

If attrition rates are anything like the example above, it is in the best interests of the employers to embrace work placements. They would then be aware that graduates who have done a work placement know that they want to do accounting and also know what area of accounting they would prefer to be employed in: public accounting, commercial accounting, non-profit accounting, superannuation, IT and accounting or insolvency. Therefore employers must be consulted, engaged, and encouraged to be involved⁷.

6.2 Limitations

Although this study has provided valuable insights into the employer views about work placements in Accountancy, it does have some limitations. The research was conducted on one small cohort of employers as a single case study. As a result, although this is acceptable for theory testing (in this case, the power and relevance of sociocultural theory), the results are not generalisable. As well, all the employers voluntarily agreed to be part of the unpaid program. These employers were therefore very committed to the benefits of providing work placements to students.

6.3 Future Research

If work placements are to become a more prevalent learning tool in accountancy programs/courses, there are three key stakeholders in their development – students, employers and universities. Accounting research has already been conducted on the impact of work placements on students but very little in the other two. Future research should therefore occur in two main areas. Firstly, without accounting-related employers, a work placement program cannot operate. Because this is a small study, future research must be conducted on a larger scale on organisations who do and do not offer work placements to see what impediments employers see to their involvement and how these can be resolved. As well, many organisations spend a great deal of money on recruitment. How successful is it? How many graduates stay in the first few years? Are graduates leaving because they do not like the real-life practical side of accounting? Is this just occurring in a small number of organisations or is this a general problem? If it is a general problem, would this be overcome if all accounting employers contributed to workplace learning, thereby making the pool of applicants for graduate accounting jobs better equipped and more aware of what the job entails and therefore stay longer? The professional bodies can play a major part in helping change the culture of these firms regarding work placements.

Another area of future research revolves around the universities. Empirical data is required about which universities have implemented an accountancy work placement program. The reasons why these schools have implemented a program and the nature of their program; and also the reasons why schools have not implemented a program should be examined.

The data provided from this future research will be vital in determining the long term usefulness of work placements in professional accounting education.⁸ It will

inform the profession as to the impediments to situated learning. This could lead to the development of solutions to those problems and bring about greater opportunities for students to participate in accountancy work placements prior to graduation.

Notes

¹ It is interesting to compare this to France where professional accounting education fully embraces workplace learning (Stanley and Joannides, 2012). French students do three month and six month programs in their first and second year and in some business schools, a gap year is mandatory.

² For an explanatory definition of a community of practice, see Wenger (2006).

³ For consistency, this time period is the same as the student and graduate data collected and analysed in Stanley (2013).

⁴ The ICAA changed its name to Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand (CAANZ) in 2014.

⁵ A 5-point Likert scale was used in a survey of the 28 students in the cohort (Stanley, 2013) with 1 representing strongly disagree 2 disagree, 3 neutral, 4 agree and 5 representing strongly agree. The overall perceptions of the objectives in terms of mean responses were that the program brought a sense of realism to the concepts being taught in face-to-face teaching (4.86); the program allowed students to appreciate the importance of university identified graduate capabilities such as problem solving, decision making, communication, working in teams, information and technology literacy in the accounting workplace (4.54); the program enabled them to reflect critically on their practices in preparation for employment (4.46); and the program enabled them to appreciate the culture, values and norms that are part of being a professional accountant in an accounting workplace (4.39). These means were well above 4.0 indicating that the students agreed that the objectives had been achieved.

⁶ Vatter was a visiting professor from the University of California at Berkeley, who recommended in 1965 that professional education for accountancy in Australia should be over 6 years with the first two years being full-time study and the next four years being substantially full-time employment as an “apprentice” as well as part-time study (Vatter, 1965, p. 23).

⁷ This has been emphasised further by the release of the *National Strategy on Work Integrated Learning in University Education* (Universities Australia, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Australian Industry Group, Business Council of Australia, and Australian Collaborative Education Network, 2015)

⁸ In this regard, a change was made to the 2012 release of the program/course accreditation guidelines document by CPA Australia and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia. This accreditation document sets out guidelines relating to the broad parameters that all university accounting programs must adhere to in order for their students to be admitted as a member of the two major Australian professional bodies. The document states: “In support of developing well-rounded, work-ready graduates, the Professional Bodies welcome the inclusion of work-integrated learning in Australian accounting degrees across a range of formats ...” (CPA Australia and ICAA, 2012, p. 18). This is the first time acknowledgement of this type of learning has been included in the document.

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